

11 USC § 1325(b) (1)
11 USC § 1255(b) (2)
11 USC § 1325(b) (3)
11 USC § 707(b) (2) (A) (ii) (I)
statutory construction

In Re Carlin
8/18/06

Case No. 06-60116
AER

Published

A debtor who owned his vehicle free and clear of liens, sought to deduct a vehicle ownership expense for purposes of § 1325(b)'s "disposable income" test.

The court was called upon to interpret § 707(b) (2) (A) (ii) (I), which the disposable income test incorporates for above-the-median income debtors. That section incorporates the IRS collection standards as to allowable expense deductions. Its language confines the allowable expenses to those which are "applicable". Under the IRS standards, only those who have a monthly loan or lease payment associated with their vehicle may take the vehicle ownership expense. The court, construing the plain meaning of the statute, held that because the debtor owned his vehicle free and clear, the expense was not "applicable" to him, and thus was not available.

E06-13(8)

In Re:) Bankruptcy Case
) No. 06-60116-aer13
DAROLD IVAN CARLIN,)
) MEMORANDUM OPINION
)
Debtor.)

Facts:

Debtor filed his Chapter 13 petition on February 3, 2006. His Current Monthly Income ("CMI")¹ exceeds the applicable Oregon Median

MEMORANDUM OPINION-1

1 Income, as reported on his Statement of Current Monthly Income and
2 Calculation of Commitment Period and Disposable Income, Official Form
3 B22C ("SCMI"). The monthly disposable income as reported on Debtor's
4 SCMI is \$438.64.

5 Debtor owns one vehicle, a 1996 Cadillac, which is unencumbered.
6 Debtor does not lease any vehicles. On line 28 of the SCMI, Debtor
7 claimed a vehicle ownership expense of \$475. On line 27 of the SCMI,
8 Debtor claimed a vehicle operating expense of \$305. Debtor is entitled
9 to an additional \$200 operating expense because his car is over six years
10 old.²

11 **Question Presented.**

12 In calculating "disposable income" for purposes of 11 U.S.C. §
13 1325(b)(2) & (3),³ is a debtor entitled to deduct a vehicle ownership
14 expense if the debtor owns the vehicle free and clear of any liens?

15 **Discussion:**

16 This case was filed after the effective date of the Bankruptcy
17 Abuse Prevention and Consumer Protection Act of 2005 (BAPCPA).⁴ The
18 issue at bar addresses application of the disposable income test in
19 Chapter 13 post-BAPCPA.

22 ² Under the Internal Revenue Service's (IRS) Transportation Standards, in
23 situations where there is no loan or lease payment obligation on a vehicle that
24 is over six years old and/or has reported mileage of 75,000 or more miles, an
additional operating expense of \$200 is allowable. Internal Revenue Manual,
Financial Analysis Handbook, Part 5, Chapter 8, § 5.8.5.5.2(3) (09-01-2005).

25 ³ Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent statutory references are to Title
26 11, United States Code.

⁴ Pub.L. No. 109-8, 119 Stat. 23 (2005).

1 Pursuant to § 1325(b) (1) (B), the Court may not confirm a Chapter
2 13 plan proposing less than full payment, if an unsecured creditor or the
3 chapter 13 trustee objects, unless the plan provides that all of the
4 debtor's projected "*disposable income*" is paid to unsecured creditors
5 over the "*applicable commitment period*."⁵ For purposes of calculating
6 *disposable income*, if a debtor's CMI (times 12) is above the median
7 income⁶ for the state in which he or she files, as here, the debtor's
8 expenses are those allowed under §§ 707(b) (2) (A) and (B).⁷
9 §§ 1325(b) (2) & (3).⁸ Section 707(b) (2) (A) (ii) (I) incorporates expenses
10 allowed under IRS collection standards.

11
12 ⁵ For Chapter 13 debtors who have CMI (times 12), which is above the
13 applicable median income for the state in which they file, as here, the
14 "*applicable commitment period*" is 5 years. §1325(b) (4) (A) (ii).

15 ⁶See, § 101(39A) for the definition of "median family income."

16 ⁷ These are the expenses allowed under the so-called Chapter 7 "means
17 test" for determining whether the presumption of abuse arises.

18 ⁸ Section 1325(b) (2) provides in pertinent part:

19 For purposes of this subsection, the term
20 "disposable income" means current monthly income received
21 by the debtor ... less amounts reasonably necessary to be
22 expended--

23 A) (i) for the maintenance or support of the
24 debtor or a dependent of the debtor....

25 Section 1325(b) (3) provides in pertinent part:

26 Amounts reasonably necessary to be expended under
paragraph (2) shall be determined in accordance with
subparagraphs (A) and (B) of section 707(b) (2), if the
debtor has current monthly income, when multiplied by 12,
greater than--

(A) in the case of a debtor in a household of 1
person, the median family income of the
applicable State for 1 earner....

1 The IRS Local Standards include a transportation expense, which
2 the IRS has divided into two categories: ownership costs and operating
3 costs. The IRS has issued guidelines for applying its collection
4 financial standards, including the Local Standards. According to IRS
5 publications that discuss how the transportation expense is to be
6 applied, the "ownership cost" is only applicable to debtors who actually
7 have a monthly loan or lease payment obligation associated with a
8 vehicle. The IRS Collection Financial Standards, which include the
9 transportation Local Standards, specifically state: "*[i]f a taxpayer has*
10 *a car payment, the allowable ownership cost added to the allowable*
11 *operating cost equals the allowable transportation expense," but, "[i]f a*
12 *taxpayer has no car payment or no car, only the operating costs portion*
13 *of the transportation standard is used to come up with the allowable*
14 *transportation expense.*" Internal Revenue Service, Collection Financial
15 Standards.⁹(emphasis added). See also, Internal Revenue Manual,
16 Financial Analysis Handbook, Part 5, Chapter 15, § 5.15.1.7(4)(b) (05-1-
17 2004) (repeating practically identical language). In addition, Chapter 8
18 of the Financial Analysis Handbook provides that the ownership expense is
19 allowed only for the "purchase and/or lease of a vehicle." Internal
20 Revenue Manual, Financial Analysis Handbook, Part 5, Chapter 8, §
21 5.8.5.5.2(3) (09-01-2005).

22 Based on the above IRS standards, it would appear Debtor may not
23 claim the operating expense because he owns the car free and clear.
24 Debtor argues, however, that the statute's plain meaning dictates
25

26 ⁹ The IRS Collection Financial Standards may be found online at:
www.irs.gov/individuals/article/0,,id=96543,00.html

1 otherwise. Trustee and UST maintain that the plain language prohibits the
2 expense to debtors who own vehicles free and clear.

3 In interpreting §707(b)(2)(A)(ii)(I), the starting point is the
4 statute's text. Miller v. U.S., 363 F.3d 999, 1008 (9th Cir. 2004).
5 The Supreme Court has consistently admonished that where the text is
6 plain, the court is to apply it as written, unless its application would
7 lead to absurd results. See e.g., Lamie v. U.S. Trustee, 540 U.S. 526,
8 534, 124 S.Ct. 1023, 1030, 157 L.Ed.2d 1024 (2004). The court must
9 aspire to give meaning to a statute's every word. Miller, supra;
10 Commissioner of Internal Revenue v. Ewing, 439 F.3d 1009, 1014 (9th Cir.
11 2006) ("a statute ought, upon the whole, to be so construed that, if it
12 can be prevented, no clause, sentence, or word shall be superfluous,
13 void, or insignificant." (internal citations and quotations omitted)).

14 Section 707(b)(2)(A)(ii)(I), provides in pertinent part that a
15 debtor's "monthly expenses *shall* be the debtor's *applicable* monthly
16 expense *amounts specified* under the . . . Local Standards . . . issued by
17 the Internal Revenue Service" (emphasis added). Debtor contends
18 that the term "shall" is a command to use the "amounts specified" under
19 the IRS standards, and, as such, denotes that the plain language allows
20 the vehicle operating expense even if the debtor is not making payments
21 on either a lease or secured debt relating to the vehicle. Trustee and
22 UST argue that the statutory command is modified by the term
23 "applicable," which limits the allowable expenses only to those which
24 apply to Debtor under the IRS standards.

25 Two of the courts to have addressed this issue, In re Hardacre,
26 338 B.R. 718, 725 (Bankr. N.D. Tex. 2006) and In re McGuire, 342 B.R. 608

1 (Bankr. W.D. Mo. 2006) have sided with Trustee and UST. This court
2 agrees with the Hardacre and McGuire courts and concludes that the
3 statute plainly and unambiguously does not allow the vehicle operating
4 expense at issue to "free and clear" owners.¹⁰

5 As explained by the McGuire court:

6 [T]he statute provides that a "debtor's monthly
7 expenses shall be the debtor's applicable monthly expense
8 amounts" under the Standards. If a debtor does not own or
9 lease a vehicle, the ownership expense is not "applicable"
10 to that debtor. Thus, if a debtor is not incurring
expenses for the purchase or lease of a vehicle, the
debtor cannot claim a vehicle ownership expense under the
IRS Standards. This conforms with the IRS's application
of the Standards.

11 Id. at 613.

12 Applying the statute as written does not lead to absurd results.
13 See, In re Barr, 341 B.R. 181, 185 (Bankr. M.D. N.C. 2006) (applying
14 § 1325(b)(3) as written is not absurd). There is nothing absurd in
15 Congress drawing the line for vehicle ownership expense eligibility at
16 those debtors who are making payments on the vehicle. Numerous
17 safeguards are in place to protect both debtors and creditors. Debtors
18 who own old or high mileage cars "free and clear," are entitled to an
19 extra \$200 per month operating expense. See f.n. #2, *infra*. Also, a
20 "free and clear" owner is not "stuck" with the vehicle operating expenses
21 allowed under the IRS Standards. Section 707(b)(2) (**B**) is also available
22 for "above the median" Chapter 13 debtors. § 1325(b)(2) & (3). Section
23 707(b)(2) (**B**), allows additional expenses based on "special
24 circumstances." See, In Re Renicker, 342 B.R. 304 (Bankr. W.D. Mo. 2006)

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26 ¹⁰ The court need not attempt to divine legislative intent in a case
where, as here, the language of the statute is clear. Miller, supra at 1009.

1 (recognizing § 707(b)(2)(B) as applicable in Chapter 13 disposable income
2 analysis).¹¹

3 Based on the above, confirmation of the debtor's plan will be
4 denied, unless within 15 days of entry of this opinion, Debtor agrees to
5 an amendment to be incorporated in the confirmation order providing for
6 plan payments to continue until \$42,818.40¹² is paid to unsecured
7 creditors.¹³

8
9 ¹¹ Further, while not at issue in the case at bar, there is an emerging
10 line of authority that the "disposable income" calculation under the means test
11 is not dispositive of the amount necessary to dedicate towards a Chapter 13
12 plan. The text of § 1325(b)(1)(B) requires a dedication of *projected*
13 disposable income. Thus, under this line of authority, the means test bottom
14 line may be adjusted downward (or sometimes upward) based on actual anticipated
15 income and expenses, to determine "projected" disposable income. In re Jass,
16 340 B.R. 411 (Bankr. D.Ut. 2006) (holding that Form B22C is a starting point in
17 determining projected disposable income, which any party can rebut with
18 evidence of actual numbers, including Schedules I and J); In re Kibbe, 342 B.R.
19 411 (Bankr.D.N.H. 2006); In re Grady, 343 B.R. 747, (Bankr. N.D.Ga. 2006). But
20 see, In Re Alexander, 344 B.R. 742, (Bankr. E.D. N.C., 2006) ("projected
21 disposable income" means "disposable income"). Presumably, an above-the-median
22 debtor would also not be stuck with the means test numbers in proposing a
23 modified plan under § 1329, Grady, supra, which, for example, proposed to
24 replace a non-operating vehicle owned free and clear, by leasing or borrowing
funds to acquire a functioning one.

18 ¹² Excluding the vehicle ownership expense and adding an additional \$200
19 to the vehicle operating expense renders "disposable income" of \$713.64/mo.
20 Because none of the parties have argued an adjustment to this figure is
21 appropriate under the Jass rationale, the court will use this figure as
22 "projected disposable income" for purposes of § 1325(b)(1)(B). As noted above,
23 "the applicable commitment period" is 5 years (60 months). The court is aware
24 that an issue exists as to whether the "applicable commitment period" is a
"multiplier" or a temporal requirement. See e.g., In Re Renicker, 342 B.R.
304, 306, n.1 (Bankr. W.D.Mo. 2006) (recognizing but not deciding the issue);
McGuire, supra at 615 (temporal requirement). Here, the parties have elected
to treat it as a "multiplier" and thus the court will not address the issue.
Multiplying \$713.64 times 60 months produces \$42,818.40.

25 ¹³ Debtor has currently proposed to fund his plan with \$900/mo. payments.
26 Under Trustee's calculations, \$42,818.40 will be paid out to "unsecured
creditors" in approximately 56 months. Under Trustee's position, it does not
(continued...)

1 This opinion constitutes the court's findings of fact and
2 conclusions of law under FRBP 7052; they shall not be separately stated.

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4 /s/ Albert E. Radcliffe

5 ALBERT E. RADCLIFFE
6 Bankruptcy Judge
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22 ¹³ (...continued)

23 appear that "unsecured creditors" under § 1325(b)(1)(B), include either the
24 commissions owed to the Chapter 13 Trustee or the unpaid fees owed to Debtor's
25 counsel (\$2,500 per the plan), that is, these amounts must be paid in addition
26 to the \$42,818.40. Again, there may be an issue as to whether Trustee's
position is valid. See, e.g. In re Wilbur, 344 B.R. 650, (Bankr. D.Ut. 2006)
(discussing issue and concluding "unsecured creditors" in § 1325(b)(1)(b),
means only general, non-priority unsecured creditors). Here, again, no party
has raised this issue.